Safe Harbors Fact Sheet
March 31, 2006

Goal

The Safe Harbors data collection system is an essential tool in our efforts to end homelessness in Seattle and King County. Safe Harbors provides information that will allow the Committee to End Homelessness in King County and the broader community to:
- understand the workings of the existing homeless services system and the needs of homeless people.
- coordinate systems and funding to efficiently deliver the long-term housing and support services that homeless individuals and families need to stabilize their lives, get healthy, find work, and live independently.
- measure our progress in ending homelessness.

Rationale

In Seattle and King County, millions of dollars are invested in services to homeless people. Until now, we have not had a way to understand region-wide the results of our investments and measure our progress toward ending homelessness. Safe Harbors, the tool that our community will use to take those measurements and carry out the Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness in King County, was first proposed and approved by the Seattle City Council in 1999.

Later, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) made development of a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) a factor in applying for McKinney federal funding for homelessness intervention and prevention programs. Seattle and King County are awarded more than $18 million a year in McKinney funding to pay for transitional and long-term housing services. Our HMIS — Safe Harbors — will keep us competitive in that process. As of this year, all providers of shelter and transitional housing services funded by the City of Seattle, King County and United Way of King County (the major funders of the Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness) are required to participate in Safe Harbors.

How it works

Safe Harbors is a web-based computer database system that collects information about the homeless population and homeless services in Seattle and King County. Shelter and transitional housing providers trained by Safe Harbors staff enter information about individuals served and services provided through the Safe Harbors application.

Providers from across Seattle and King County also send their data to the Safe Harbors database, housed by the Washington State Community, Trade and Economic Development's (CTED) Housing Division. ***All personal client information is encrypted and is not identifiable as it sits on the database, thereby ensuring privacy for clients.***

How it works (continued)

Safe Harbors aggregates information received, and paints a picture of homelessness and trends region-wide. This information, as synthesized by Safe Harbors, will help to increase our understanding of the root causes of homelessness. As time goes by, we will be able to assess whether programs are moving homeless people into long-term housing with appropriate supportive services like health care, mental health care and job training. We will also be able to identify service gaps so we can improve and better coordinate housing and services. And, we will regularly measure and report on our progress as we build a better system.

Providers also can use Safe Harbors to report to funders on the progress they are making with their own programs.

Data privacy

Safe Harbors uses the best security safeguards that technology can provide, and conforms to or exceeds all HUD, state, county and city security and privacy requirements.

As mentioned above, all personal client information is encrypted and is not identifiable on the database, thereby ensuring privacy for clients. Providers have the ability to access their own client data. Only with client permission do providers share client information with one another so that their shared clients don't have to provide personal information multiple times.

The Safe Harbors sponsors — the City of Seattle, King County and United Way of King County — are not interested in individual data. We are interested only in the aggregated data that provides a big picture of homelessness.

Data collection and interpretation

Safe Harbors is useful only if the system can eliminate duplicated client records. In other words, if the same individual is seeking shelter and other services at five sites, we need to know that it is just one person who is homeless and not five. And we need to know whether that person is staying in the shelter system or has moved permanently into housing. To create a so-called "unique identifier" instead of using actual names, we need at minimum his/her name or initials, date of birth and gender. Full names and Social Security numbers significantly improve the ability to create unique identifiers.

Other HMIS data elements expected by HUD include race/ethnicity; veteran status; disabling condition; program entry and exit dates; income and benefits; and employment, health and education histories.

The Safe Harbors sponsors recommend that additional questions be asked, to strengthen our ability to understand trends in homelessness and how to end it most effectively. These questions explore reasons for homelessness, and whether the services received by clients are successful in moving them permanently out of homelessness.

Beneficiaries

Safe Harbors is essential to ending homelessness in our community, and virtually everyone benefits from this effort. Homeless individuals and families benefit by getting the services they need to leave homelessness behind. All taxpayers benefit because housing, supporting and employing people is far less expensive than placing them in emergency shelters or jails, or treating them in emergency rooms or detox centers. And, the entire community benefits because we are dealing with a serious social issue in a humane and respectful way, and giving thousands of people in our community hope and opportunity for a good life.

Timeline

1999 — Safe Harbors initiated and approved by the Seattle City Council to help city government determine how to improve housing and services for homeless men, women and children in Seattle. Legislation also requires shelter and transitional housing providers funded by the city to participate in Safe Harbors.

2001 — Congress directs HUD to assess the extent of homelessness in America as well as the effectiveness of government homeless prevention programs. All communities wanting to remain competitive for receiving federal funding for homeless programs (including McKinney funding, which provides $18 million per year to Seattle and King County) are encouraged to develop an HMIS that will produce an "unduplicated" count of homeless individuals and demonstrate that they are developing effective plans to resolve homelessness.

2001-2003 — Safe Harbors becomes a partnership among the City of Seattle, King County and the United Way of King County, and the database system is developed.

2004 — Safe Harbors pilot begins with six providers in Seattle and King County. Statewide HMIS collaboration also begins, with Snohomish County's adoption of Safe Harbors.

2005 — The Safe Harbors database is transferred to CTED. Staff working in 107 programs operated by 36 agencies are trained by Safe Harbors staff. All agencies applying for 2006 funding from the City of Seattle, King County and United Way of King County must agree to participate in Safe Harbors.

2006 — Training of providers continues and on-site technical assistance and troubleshooting is ramped up. Data integration is under way, with the agencies operating 40 percent of the shelter beds and transitional housing in Seattle and King County participating. (Downtown Emergency Service Center, YWCA, Catholic Community Services, Plymouth Housing Group, Community Psychiatric Clinic and the Multi-Service Center.)

For more information

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